

General Education and Museum Education: Between Singularity and Plurality

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Resumen

El artículo examina la relación entre educación general y educación a través de los museos, y entre varias materias y la educación en los museos. El término “educación” es normal en el vocabulario general y en su significado más amplio implica de la actividad de enseñar, pero dentro de su significado específico se refiere al conocimiento propio de esta actividad. Esto identifica un área de investigación y conocimiento dentro de las ciencias de la educación definido como educación general. En realidad puede tomar muchas formas (p.ej. educación especial para discapacitados, educación comparada de métodos de enseñanza utilizados en diferentes sistemas escolares, etc) así como muchas formas de educación en los museos. El artículo estudia el reconocimiento y la especificidad de la educación a través de los museos en comparación con otros campos, incluso si la estructura de la educación especializada a través de los museos (arte, arqueología, historia, etc) permite emerger algunas líneas de actuación general.

Palabras clave: Enseñanza, aprendizaje, didáctica, educación en museos.

Abstract

The article examines the relationship between general and museum education, and between the various discipline and museum educations. The term “education” is quite frequent in the daily use and –as we know– in its broader meaning it suggest the teaching activity, but in a more specific meaning it refers to the knowledge pertaining to this activity. This identifies an area of research and knowledge within educational sciences defined as general education. In reality there are many forms it could take (e.g. special education addressed to disabled subjects, comparative education examining the teaching methods used throughout different school systems etc.) as well as many different forms of museum education. The article studies also the problem of recognition and specificity of the museum education contribution in comparison with other fields, even if the structure of the specialized museum educations (art, archaeological, historical museums, etc.) make some general education abstracts emerging.

Key Words: Teaching, learning, didactic, disciplines, museum education

Methods of approach to museum education

Museum education aims to stimulate lasting learning in the visitor, like in any other type of education, that leads to the stable modification of behaviour and attitudes. Museum education has been torn for years between theoretical models and

operative programmes because, up until recently, it has had to survive the same division between theory and practice as has General Education.

Today the definition of new forms of museum education means underlining its aims and objectives and highlighting the central notion of acquiring specific abilities and skills that lead to the tangible transformation of the museum system and its culture. This idea brings into play how research in particular, as well as economical, political and educational concerns, let the two sides of museum education, theory and practice, combine together synergically through the work of professionals in museum education.

In a sense educational knowledge means having to do with finality and theoretical meaning but more importantly it means using such knowledge to act efficiently in situations which are often very improvised in nature. We observe that “situation-based” learning depends on the context in which learning is carried out and occurs as a “semiotic” building-up of learning actions within a specific context. Such building-up of learning is considered to be a process where different types of learning interact: from cognitive to social learning (McManus, 1994). The museum is thus responsible for the cultural and social dimension of learning and is able to interact directly and continually in forming of the identity of each person (ICOM, 1972).. In fact, given that the museum has the aim of educating then each person is made to consciously select the contents, teaching method and organization of what is going to be learnt. Similarly, the person is made to ask himself about the explicit and implicit messages that the museum sends out as a community and a cultural agent.

In other words, in order to make the museum visit productive the problem of the teaching approach should be looked at beforehand in relation to the ability to analyse events, manage procedures, develop programmes and thus clearly define conditions, objectives, content, techniques, methods, materials plus evaluation and control methods. But these concerns have not always been retraceable, or only with considerable effort, in the history of museum education from the ‘40’s onwards (Guarducci, 1988). They concern elements which are inter-twined in the history of museum education as the “history of practices” which includes all that has been done and carried out, the complexity of methods and procedures which is put into act by the single operator in carrying out his work, as well as the elements that emerge as part of the history of the museum institution, where there are precise social and material conditions which have characterized and continue to be characterize the experience of specific fields. The diversity of approaches is hence represented by the fact that there are different concepts of museum education which have changed over time, in the sense that each approach has been inspired by its own concept of education.

Hence, from the practical point of view professionals in museum education, just like general education, have developed a growing division between what is produced in terms of choice and educational action from what is known as theoretical knowledge. This has lead to stereotyping their professional behaviour, leading them to take on their own “educational logic” that often can’t be compared with the logic of scientific evaluation. Consequently, educational activity in the museum has been

carried out over time without any form of control of its adequacy or of any evaluation about the effect it has on the public. Museum educational activity has always in fact been far away from self evaluation.

This is founded on the conviction that the idea of evaluation, as taken from general education, does not mean controlling, but means making value judgements about the student who is learning: the student is good or bad, rather than competent or incompetent. In other words the quality of the judgement depends on the level of conformity of the student's behaviour compared to the (desired) model which is implied in certain educational choices (Nuzzaci, 2004). The adaptation is carried out at the values level and then at the learning level. Similarly, the idea that the cultural programme in museum education need to be richly stimulating to elicit intense emotions to have an effect on the emotional level rather than at the cognitive level also appears invalidated by the same value judgement. Behaviour of this nature in museum education which centres its action exclusively on the emotional involvement of the public, is at best destined to have positive effects in learning in the case of single museum pieces, even if it is very difficult to think that this happens in the case of sporadic visits to the museum. The importance of learning in the museum in terms of cognitive take-out or favourable disposition to learning should always be taken into account and both motivated and strengthened, otherwise there would be a loss of quality in education.

It has been demonstrated by the fact that every one of us has been a student and over the course of our school lives we have learnt to make assumptions and to adapt our learning behaviour as needed to the different styles of learning and teaching of the teacher (Gagnè, 1989; Bennet, 1981). The most often asked question that we all made while, for example, doing an oral test at school was the following: "What does he want to know? And how does he want me to tell him?" Such adaptation has given place to a ritual form of learning as well as teaching. In the past students basically did not know how to learn because they did not have real motivation for the activities which they participated in; the same lack of knowledge is also assumed in the case of visits to cultural sites as well. Literature on education reminds us that things that are learnt with passion are never forgotten. This leads us to consider that the cognitive take-out of the museum experience will have positive effects and be appreciated only if supported by real motivation and if the complexity of the training process is added and never lost from view.

Hence, it is apparent that the museum educational process needs to base its programmes on what motivates the desire to learn as part of the set of cultural opportunities which everyone already uses. To summarize, the ability to produce effective teaching capable of agreeing on the definition of adequate cultural profiles depends on the existence of a functional relationship between the various learning experiences that the individual it is exposed to, including the museum experience which should be inserted in the coherent set of functions.

This means that if we wanted to re-establish our knowledge about museum education we would have to start from how much of what is taught to students is actually acquired, and above all individualize the specific aspects which characterize museum education compared to other forms of education.

The plurality and integration of museum education

Is it right to speak of museum education in the singular?

The word “education” is used frequently every day and broadly means the activity of teaching. However, more specifically it refers to the knowledge produced by this activity. This identifies an area of research and knowledge in the field of science of education that is defined as “General Education”. In actual fact different forms of education exist: special education for disabled persons, comparative education which studies teaching models across different educational systems, history, geography, philosophy etc. that are concerned with finding teaching solutions within a certain area of knowledge and so on.

At first glance there seems to be two interchangeable terms: education and teaching, as noted by Vertecchi (1994, 5). If we were to try to find a distinction in meaning we would have to say that “education” is concerned with the field of knowledge related to teaching while “teaching” concerns the teaching act itself. The former places emphasis on the reference to a rationality which is bound to the action, while the latter places emphasis on the action itself.

It is important to note that the emphasis on the cognitive component of museum education (education) has slowly shifted to emphasising the experiences which are linked to the action (teaching) even if this has occurred for a other reasons. Often in fact the single museum expert has been worked alone in managing the complex area of cultural communication. It is true that many operators have often worked in precarious conditions and anonymously for years, finding the time for educational activities regardless of the multitude of other museum activities which have to be carried out.

Additionally, when we adopt styles and models of behaviour that help us to resolve a problem we do not always make use of a method of approach of any particular type, because when we act we simply act on what we know and on what we have used up till that moment in time. It’s like saying that there isn’t always time to decide whether to adhere to one type of approach or another because that choice would require time, which isn’t always available to the museum operator who often has other responsibilities in addition to museum education. Undoubtedly the problem of defining a pathway to quality within the museum context remains as it depends on many positive conditions and not just on the “good or bad intentions” of those who work on the cultural programmes.

All of this has had important repercussions on the development of our knowledge of museum education which still lets us to draw the analogy between general education and museum education, even is not always valid.

In the tradition of education the concept of “method” has been understood as a set of teaching techniques that translate the contents of a theory into certain activities, with the aim of producing learning to provoke some kind of change in the student. Such a concept is drawn from the theory of operative solutions. It has been a fundamental step not only in general education but also museum education. It

doesn't mean that the role of "the method" is any less importance in the history of education, but rather it concerns finding common points between theory and practice. Over time "the method" has become a principle for comparing museum knowledge to museum education. It can be used as an approach within the museum context to give the impression of greater adequacy and solidarity of operative solutions and for simplify and widening educational programmes which haven't always taken into account differences between visitors (Nuzzaci, 2003).

The notion that there is a right way of "going about museum education" is no longer held today, just as in the past general education claimed that "the method" was the panacea for all the cultural programmes that made sense. The concept of "the method" lead to the idea of a homogenous cultural programme for all students by assuming that students were all the same and learn in the same way. But it soon became evident that this wasn't true, that different students learn in different ways and that any generalization or simplification in educational approaches leads to defeat. In fact, students do not learn at the same pace. The presumed adequacy of a single learning solution which is the same for everyone is not capable of absolving any educational function because it finishes in not satisfying the learning needs of anyone. This is valid not only for the school context but also for the museum context, which is particularly characterized by precariousness and the lack of knowledge about the end-user of its educational programmes. For this reason the problem "of teaching and learning" in the museum can't have just one solution which is valid for everyone and uniformly practical, because visitors are different just as students are different. The training programme has to be reinforced according to the needs of a certain public which learns within a certain spatial and time dimension (Nuzzaci, 2004).

This picture is complicated when we think that, just like in schools, the museum public is differentiated in terms of demographics, socially and culturally, and so forth, which consequently puts the concept of museum education in difficulty. It is no wonder that museum education currently feel the need for support from educational research to plan programmes in new ways and to measure their cognitive take out.

It is obvious to think that museum education has behaved in the same way as general education for a long time when taking into consideration its problem of it gaining recognition and the speciality of its contribution compared to other fields, even if it is true that the structure of museum education in various sectors (of art museums, archaeology museums, history museums, demo-ethno-anthropology museums etc) has made use of some abstractions from general education (Nuzzaci, 2006).

We could claim that the lack of realization of the process of museum teaching-learning constitutes one of the founding reasons that has prevented the museum from offering an answer that is qualitatively adequate to the growing demand for (cultural) education. It often involves a demand that comes from a wide range of public, even if unfortunately it still concerns today more often those who have visited a museum when children, adolescents or as young persons. The growing interest in museum education and the widening museum public has significantly influenced interest from different organizations (International Organizations such as the ICOM, National and

International meetings and seminars) to use the museum for educational purposes (ICOM, 1972; ICOM, 1995; ICOM, 2005).

However, there is the need for a constant flow of information in museum systems management, especially in educational services. The need for information stems from the need keep the whole educational experience under the condition of continual control. There is an urgent need to look at the role that evaluation can carry out in the museum educational process to enable operators to make the best decisions regarding the educational process and to be able to appreciate their validity. This is the same as considering training choices as being modifiable and placing greater weight on adaptation in education, as well as realising the differences existing between the different types of public and acquiring elements which are useful for the successful programming of the cultural product offered.

The museum system has reached a size over the years that has progressively highlighted the close relationship between modifications that effect the quality of the cultural programme and the availability of information on the characteristics of those programmes. The flow of information is an indispensable condition for managing the museum system. Without which it is improbable that efficacious educational decisions can be made nor can there be innovation in the system. The most important consequence of this approach is that “evaluation” is no longer superimposed on a “given condition”, but becomes a principle for regulating activities, as in the scholastic area, a knowledge function that permits us to consciously make the decisions that appear to be most opportune at the time.

From here the need to develop educational programmes that make reference to a solid layer of research moves away from the idea of cultural education in the museum, as happened for years in the school, that is centred only on intuition and subjective choices. Thus there is a growing support for an educational approach which is both orientated towards the analysis and definition of problems, exploration of hypotheses, rationalization of procedures and their rigorous evaluation.

Often any attempt to introduce elements that rationalize the organization of the work of museum education was viewed suspiciously. The most common objection is that the museum is not a school and that it is not responsible for teaching.

From a certain point of view this is true, however it is not possible to exclude that there can be any form of learning in the museum. Frequently it is stated that the museum piece “talks” to the visitor, but I would add that it only talks to those who are capable of listening, that is those who have the skills and know-how to listen. This is demonstrated by the fact that the lack of interpretive capacity has frequently been taken as proof that it is useless to make experiments in this sense.

If it is true that communication in the educational place doesn’t mean eliciting, but means increasing the interpretive senses instead, then the lack of specialist lexicon, unconnected reception of the museum message, common place rhetoric used in this area etc. are the consequences of pitching the museum piece too low for the interpretive capacity of the public.

In short, education is not in itself a resource for the public, but it becomes one due to its functionality in responding to the needs of a certain area of interest.

Today all this should be taken into consideration within the rather fervid context of educational research and discussion because many museums are developing cultural programmes capable of satisfying the general demands of visitors. This brings about considerable changes to the traditional image of the museum.

The wave of renewal of the museum system has led to the launch of important educational programmes for cultural heritage, directed at ensuring that the principle of equal opportunity in visiting is really achievable for everyone.

Over time it seems that there has been a great deal of activity in this sector, demonstrated by the fact that there has been attempts to work towards defining specific models and strategies for learning in the museum, to improve the continuity between the skills possessed by the visitor and those needed in the museum area, but more importantly to study the congruency between the quality of the cultural experience of the visitor and the quality of the museum. It is evident that this extension of the role of the museum corresponds to a more dynamic concept of education, that can not be conceived as an activity that reproduces a certain model, but has to search for the reasons to justify its choices in each specific situation.

This climate is certainly favourable to innovation and has led to the development of some first pioneering experimental programmes that have concentrated on renewing this field by testing different instruments and specific techniques of museum education in areas centred on concrete reality which is the starting point for their validation or falsification (Nardi, 1999; Nuzzaci, 1999; Nuzzaci, 2000; Nuzzaci, 2001a). At the strictly instrumental level in this area research has not completed its task of supplying new skills and techniques to the training process. That is, there hasn't been any effort to analyse processes or understand the implications of other aspects on the museum public to overcome the traditional division between museum and school cultures (or other cultural institutions) or between the culture of the museum and that which is expressed at a social level (Nuzzaci, 2003).

Today we find that there is an equilibrium that hasn't really been positive for the cultural policy of museums over the last years. If it is positive that the public has continued to grow, it should be concerned about the qualitative level of visits to the museum, even if it difficult to express a judgement in this sense. It is difficult for museums to measure the efficacy of its own programmes and express judgement on the learning that takes place as a consequence because of the limited data available.

The problem is not only educational but also political. Just think how little space is given to museum education today and how those who work in the area are seen as the poor relatives of the great museum professionals.

The rapid development of knowledge and the museum as a producer of culture makes the experts in this sector realise the need for updating the repertoire of scientific, technical and professional skills according to the new needs that have emerged from social and economic contexts. You can no longer consider the museum

experience as being finished after completing a guided visit. Instead we consider the educational problem as being part of a complex rationale that sees the knowledge of the visitor integrated into a cultural continuum that never ceases.

It is not surprising that the importance and rapidity of the transformation that has occurred in the museum system has led to uncertainty and is often marked by policy and rulings on norms governing the profession. Hence the rulings according to which museum system functions were regulated have been overwhelmed by numerous social and economic implications connected to the new museum demand. But it doesn't surprise us even if uncertainty and contradictions have been found in cultural practices too and hence at the educational level.

A Community with Equal Opportunity Access

The general picture has been profoundly modified over the last years. Museum policy is no longer concerned with promoting the linear and elitist expansion of the respective systems, that already guarantees access to all citizens. From the '80's onwards there has been a strong growth in the attention given to the qualitative aspects of museum education: museum experts have often been dissatisfied with the educational product and continued to ask themselves what the sense of museum education is and to search for deeper answers than those accepted in the past.

Visiting a museum is important and constitutes a significant indicator of the level of quality of culture. It can not be considered good on its own but must correspond to achieving precise objectives in competency (Nuzzaci, 2004).

This is even more true if we consider museum visits for the scholastic public. The growing presence of the school in the museum, which hasn't always reciprocated with a precise qualification of use, responds to the new needs for quality that we have noted. The discussion here gets complicated. Transferral of the museum experience to the complexity of the learning experience used by students (for example in the school experience) is necessary if we want to hypothesize positive pathways of museum learning that consolidate over time on other learning experiences.

Schools have found space within the rationale of museum development which has led to the emergence of a bonus for the market, comparable to the bonus that educational knowledge is now having in the changing attitudes of the school towards the museum.

Schools are also enticed by the novelty of educational "products", in many cases without having a precise idea about what they could be used for, seemingly due to consumerism, that can be added to the idea of the museum as the temple of culture. But it is evident that chasing the novelty value of the museum's offers produces only an apparent modernization. This explains why important transformations capable of impacting on the quality of the process only come about after refining the models of use, which in turn can not be hypothesized and verified by means of dedicated research programmes.

The uncritical acceptance together with a wide-spread lack of awareness of the educational implications have undermined the positive statement of museum education. In other words, we can claim that it is only the capacity to make the best of the available resources, both material and human, that make operators capable of defining procedures that lead the general visitor to achieve certain learning. It is not surprising that in front of an attitude of total acceptance of education there is often an attitude of total refusal. Especially considering that educational research has concentrated on supplying solutions to training activity problems rather than on museum research.

For example, in a common scholastic situation an educational experiment is designed to test the efficacy of a certain solution using research instruments and methods to guarantee the comprehension of a specific problem which often concerns a small group of students.

In museum education it wouldn't make sense to design programmes that are not directed to the wider public, hence it is necessary to implement programmes that require a high level of standardized procedures, investment in the creation of educational packages and fine-tuning of a complex organizational machine, in addition to the use of equipment that have costs that can be written-off only if they are continually used. All of this has a clear influence on the length of time needed to develop a programme and on the way it is put to use. For a long time it was thought that museum educational activity was limited by the modesty of the interaction generated between visitors and the museum and to what it entails, for example in the case of guided tours, which always refer to the high number of persons that take part in the activity rather than to the management of it.

Resorting to a high level of uniformity of procedures, and not to the programmes (as it could be thought to believe) could render the latter more flexible and better adapted to individual needs, with a greater increment in museum-visitor interactions.

Taking this argument further it is natural to sustain that the moment is right for developing models of educational programmes which are the basis for configuring specific communicative interaction and ordering a succession of organized steps aimed at achieving set objectives by using the right instruments. It means defining increasingly specific strategies which, like all strategies, implies the rational evaluation of timing and resources, and a series of choices which are optimised to reach a particular aim.

It should be noted that the teaching strategy used at the museum has to have an overall architectural scheme, in which the operators work towards fine-tuning solutions that require the continual reference to the context for which they were proposed. Hence, it is evident that reactions exist between the architecture of the operation and the knowledge of operational possibilities: the whole scheme can't help but take into account what it aims to carry out, as the rational use of resources can't neglect the context in which the various procedures will be used.

Additionally, the development of complex educational packages will also have to take into account the fast growth in the number of visitors by working on new functions that will have to be added and integrated to the packages.

This makes reference to:

- a. The positive attitude of visitors to the museum which is consolidated by means of the definition of qualitatively appreciated programmes responding to the needs of every visitor
- b. The fact that in a country like Italy museums have not been very willing to experiment with innovative forms of education up till recently. It is only now possible to start programmes similar to those carried out in other countries. Clearly policy which supports them must be encouraged
- c. Educational activity today makes up a prolonged pathway to satisfying the growing and diversified museum demand
- d. Museum education enables systematic programming and proposes learning itineraries in sectors where greater demand means lesser highly skilled operators and a higher number of visitors
- e. A rational approach to educational activity means accumulating resources for future programmes, progressively improving the quality of learning programmes and keeping down the costs for the individual and society.

Now these problems are becoming urgent and constitute the fundamental concerns in this area of study. They require selecting specific indicators for the rational development of this area and lead to identifying the specificity of the contribution of museum education to general education and other forms of education.

Over the last years there has been particular recognition of the role of research, even if this enthusiasm has not been corresponded with tangible investments in energy and resources, often because the areas and the social groups involved are so numerous. This sector is multifaceted in terms of place, disciplinary elements and contents hence research refers to a universe which is overwhelmed by objects, procedures, branches, connected disciplines, theoretical presuppositions, languages, styles, contradictions, special aspects and ideological implications regarding symbolism. Such great fervour is undoubtedly positive because it shows how the problem has finally taken on its own consistency, both in the museum area as well as in the more general social area (in the community sense), especially if the most recent programmes are taken into account.

Summary

In summary, it is important to remember that the aim of this article is to consider how museum-educational culture is defined in Italy in order to reach a better definition of the theoretical-technical scope and the possibilities offered by the development of the museum learning process. A museum which is open to the community and to research means the development of museum education is open to learning and taking the path to educational knowledge. As Euripide wrote "The expected never happens, and a God opens the door to the unexpected".

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